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[conversaciones@inah.gob.mx](mailto:conversaciones@inah.gob.mx)

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CARBONARA, GIOVANNI

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# Historic centers amid politics, urban planning and restoration

GIOVANNI CARBONARA

*Translation by Valerie Magar*

## Abstract

Aware of the futility of working to preserve the old if we do not look for alternatives to the frenetic “consumption” of Spanish historical centers, F. Chueca Goitia turns his attention to the suburbs and their social life. He, therefore, questions the relationship between the historical center, the suburbs and the territory, calling for a policy of regional rebalancing supported by the public sector with appropriate legislative and financial instruments. The position of C. Flores Marini is less oriented toward denouncing. Still, he is equally aware of the profound value of monuments that, including colonial ones, have given character to the very physiognomy of Mexico. He dwells on the theme of the modern use of monuments, denouncing the risks to heritage, presented by a push toward “modernization” and economic development. He extends his reasoning to the urban environment. He notes how the harmony of the ancient cities does not depend on the exceptional quality of individual artifacts but has a “choral” character linked to the nature of the built fabric. He recognizes the important task, undoubtedly onerous, of political persuasion and awareness of the ruling classes. Both authors emphasize the importance of the active participation of the citizens, to whom good protection must give a social benefit in return, and that of training to raise the professional level of architects.

**Keywords:** historic cities, restoration, urbanism, politics.

Although they date back to the 1960s and 1970s, a period of great economic development and rapid urbanization, the writings of Fernando Chueca Goitia (1911-2004), related to the worrisome fate of historic cities (1965, *Las ciudades históricas (Un drama de nuestro tiempo)*; 1973, *El problema de las ciudades históricas*) and those of Carlos Flores Marini (1937-2015), more properly related to the restoration of architectural monuments (1966, *La restauración de monumentos coloniales en México*; 1973, *Algunos conceptos sobre la problemática de la restauración monumental en América Latina*; 1976, *El futuro del pasado*), are still very valid and, one might well say “prophetic” for the way they were able to foresee, with reference to Spain and Europe, but also to Latin America and beyond, themes that are still unresolved today and in need of continuous reflection and more advanced thinking.

On the other hand, Mexican architect Flores Marini, in his various and successive contributions, widened his scope from the theme of the protection and restoration of colonial buildings in Mexico (1966) to that of the problems of monumental restoration in Latin America (1973) and to the future of that rich and often misunderstood “past” contained in historical cities (1976). The Spanish architect, professor and intellectual Chueca Goitia, in the same period, dedicated himself to studying the fate of historic cities, which constitute a “drama” of our time (1965, 1973, and beyond, until 2001). Regarding this latter author, we should immediately mention the magnificent work recently published by Professor Ascensión Hernández Martínez (2019).

In the beginning, she recalls the very accurate restoration efforts carried out by Chueca Goitia. She praises his contribution to the national and international debate, his activity as a theorist, historian of architecture, professional and “humanist,” more precisely as an “activist of cultural heritage,” but also for having been judged by a superficial and ideological criticism, for not being a very modern, but an excessively historicist architect. His thinking is, instead, an expression of a deep reflection that goes in search of the first causes of the “break” of the contemporary world with the historical city and which does not forget the need for balance and being open to the vital elements of the present time.

For Chueca Goitia, this rupture was introduced by “functionalism,” while the cities prior to the Industrial Revolution, as well as the bourgeois and liberal cities of the 19th century—whose defense he committed himself to against the easy temptations of demolition—had remained in natural and positive continuity with the past. The sin that he finds in the functionalist city of the 20th century consists in the rejection of history, typical of the Modern Movement; on the contrary, he affirms that “the city is history” and historical cities are, in fact, palimpsests whose “salvation depends on a minimum capacity for transformation”<sup>1</sup> guided by the principle that use must follow the building type, the pre-existence, and not vice versa (Hernández Martínez, 2019: 23, 28). These statements recognize that opening to the vital reasons already mentioned and, at the same time, they also acknowledge one of the principles of architectural restoration, which distinguishes it from the practice of mere “reuse” or “recovery” or, worse, “recycling” of monumental testimonies, namely that what needs to remain movable, adaptable and flexible must always be the function. Function must respond to the “vocations” of the building, recognized and investigated through a careful historic and critical research. That is, it must be at the service of the architectural asset and not vice versa. All this in the full awareness that the use of an ancient building is, without doubt, an essential “tool” of conservation, perhaps the most important and effective one, not to be confused, however, with the purpose of restoration, which is the preservation and transmission of heritage to the future.



SEVILLA. Image: Public domain.

<sup>1</sup> Original quotation: “salvación depende de una mínima capacidad de transformación.”

All this has nothing to do with the often specious polemics related to his “conservatism,” as Oriol Bohigas (1961) affirms, which would aim, in fact, not so much at preserving, but at imposing a “stylistic” tendency to new projects, distorting the aesthetic research and making it recede toward forms of neo-traditionalism, or neo-picturesque, among others. But this is not the thought of Chueca Goitia, nor that of the *Venice Charter* (1964), the essential reference of modern architectural restoration, which is clearly opposed to renovations in style. Our architect was not hostile to contemporary architecture; on the contrary, he had personal experience in the matter, having also been the director of the Spanish National Museum of Contemporary Art. He reflected on the concept of “tradition,” of building heritage and urban heritage; he defended this heritage, even the relatively recent “neo-mudéjar” one, and the choral value of the urban fabric inappropriately called minor, including its colors, often grossly re-proposed or badly reinvented, while he recommended “pale and discreet” tones.

He drew attention to the “environment of the monuments” and not only to the acclaimed monuments, thus linking himself, as on other occasions, to formulations of Italian thought dating back to the beginning of the 20th century, with Gustavo Giovannoni and then with his students, such as Giorgio Rosi. The latter, in 1942, took up the theme again with enlightening new words and underlining the necessary passage from the consideration of the “environment of the monuments” to the “monuments of the environment” as such.

In essence, he posed a question of “tact” and “measure” without any preconceived opposition to the new, as long as this was not subservient to the economic interests of a few to the detriment of the “common good” such as the city is, by its nature: it “is not a collection of real estate interests. It is a form of life, a historical crystallization, a monumental whole.”<sup>2</sup> (Chueca Goitia in Hernández Martínez, 2019: 44, 47). Instead, he feared a homologated contemporary architecture, lacking in quality.

He is joined by other authors, such as Juan José Martín González or Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño, who regretfully observed “the peaceful destruction of the national heritage”<sup>3</sup> underway (Gaya Nuño, 1961). Aware of the futility of clinging to the preservation of the old if, at the same time, alternatives to the frenetic “consumption” of historical centers are not sought, Chueca Goitia turned his attention to the suburbs and to the social life that must be ensured in them. He therefore asked himself about the relationship between the historical center, the suburbs and the territory, invoking a policy of territorial and regional rebalancing, supported by the public sector and with adequate legislative and financial instruments. He is less confident in certain urban planning seen as a “technique” at the service of interests far from culture and from the authentic needs of citizens’ lives is less. However, his criticism goes deeper and touches on philosophical and sociological themes, such as the concept of “man-mass,” introduced by the thinking of José Ortega y Gasset, responding to the continuous demands of consumption and accustomed to a “depersonalized environment,” who sees the city as a mere place of exploitation, does not love it nor really live it, and only observes it, distracted, from the window of his car while he moves quickly through it; who is pleased to see it marked by modern skyscrapers, hated by Chueca Goitia, who judged them as “aggressive” by nature and incapable of “civil coexistence” (Hernández Martínez, 2019: 50, 65, 73). However, they represented the secret dream of every Spanish mayor (and also Italian ones, when we think of the case of Gallipoli in Apulia or Santa Marinella in Lazio) between the 1950s and 1970s.

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<sup>2</sup> Original quotation: “no es un conjunto de intereses inmobiliarios. Es una forma de vida, una cristalización histórica, un conjunto monumental.”

<sup>3</sup> Original quotation: “la destrucción pacífica del patrimonio nacional.”



MADRID. Image: Public domain.

He strongly criticized the Spanish university system, which relegated the Faculties of Architecture to a technical limbo, compressing and almost eliminating historical training and any essential humanistic reference. Therefore, he does not even appreciate the activity of the offices for protection, which oscillates between an incapacity to evaluate, make proposals and yield to current fashions on the one hand, and closed and obtuse erudition on the other. In his 1965 essay, he noted that, in the field of preservation, state actions are “rough and coarse,” that the risk of the devastation of historical cities is accentuated by the uncontrolled flow of too much money (one immediately thinks of the current situation in Europe and above all in Italy, with the extraordinary financing of the so-called *Recovery Plan* that are already showing their first adverse effects), but he felt above all the need for a work of educating the citizens. His words on the figure of the architect are harsh, “enemy of conservation” due to his lack of culture, absence of “humanistic training,” weakness and complacency due to “lack of convictions” toward current fashions that see “condescension toward the old” as “proof of scarce creative energy” (Chueca Goitia, in Hernández Martínez, 2019: 135). Finally,

on the “technolatry” of politicians, bureaucrats, and as mentioned, urban planners. Victor Hugo’s definition of the architect as a natural “vandal” comes to mind here, as does a recent reflection by Ivano Dionigi on the need “to relate to the continuum of history, which helps us understand and change and preserves us from being” men of the moment” (Chateaubriand) and “servants of fashion” (Nietzsche).<sup>4</sup> (Dionigi, 2021: 26).

He prophetically went against the tide and, as A. Hernández Martínez writes, “went beyond the limits of his time”<sup>5</sup> (Hernández Martínez, 2019: 95), anticipating issues that are on the agenda today and foreseeing the phenomenon of “dehumanization,” which has progressively become mere “touristization” of many “cities of art,” starting with Venice. Moved by a deep love and respect for Spanish and European historical cities, he often referred to them with concern: Segovia, “palpable evidence of a process of slow social biography”<sup>6</sup> (Chueca Goitia in Hernández Martínez, 2019: 70), based on continuity, Seville, “total work of art”<sup>7</sup> (Hernández Martínez, 2019: 77), but also Granada, Toledo, Salamanca and Zaragoza itself, with a great regret also for the fate of Madrid. However, the list could go on and on and expand to Europe, which he knew well.

The position expressed by Carlos Flores Marini in his 1966 essay is less oriented toward denouncing, but he is equally aware of the profound value of monuments which, including colonial ones, have given tradition and character to the very physiognomy of Mexico. He opportunely dwells on the fundamental theme of the modern use of monuments. However, in his 1973 paper, he already denounced the risks to heritage generated by the impulse of “modernization” and by the economic development underway, observing that much had been preserved due to the poverty of means. He extended his reasoning to the urban environment and noted how the harmony of the ancient cities does not necessarily depend on the exceptional quality of single elements, but has, as we have seen in Chueca Goitia, a “choral” character, so much so that the disappearance of even a single “minor” building in the built fabric, can seriously compromise the volumetric unity of the complex and, consequently, its monumental quality.

He recognized the importance of a task of political persuasion because these issues are, in fact, natively political, recognizing, however, the greatest and most difficult tasks in raising the awareness of the ruling classes. Attention to the built reality must also be combined with attention to the social and economic reality since there can be no true restoration or conservation without simultaneous environmental and human revitalization; the active participation of citizens, who should socially benefit from good protections, is fundamental. He, too, was against restoration in style and against modernist insertions, some of which err with a gross excess of “differentiation,” from which derives an evident urban disharmony.

In his 1976 essay, Flores Marini returned to the subject, warning against the risk of having North American-style museum-cities: a “city vibrates and has value when it lives”<sup>8</sup> (Flores Marini, 1976: 50), as he clearly affirmed. He rejected urban *make-up* and called for the consideration of social and functional issues; he recalled, like Chueca Goitia, the importance of training, to raise the professional level of architects and, finally, thanks to his specialized training in Rome at the University “La Sapienza,” he referred to many Italian authors, from

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<sup>4</sup> Original quotation: “di porci in relazione con il continuum della storia, che ci soccorre nel capire e nel cambiare e ci preserva dall’essere ‘gli uomini del momento’ (Chateaubriand) e ‘i servitori della moda’ (Nietzsche).”

<sup>5</sup> Original quotation: “desbordó los límites de su tiempo.”

<sup>6</sup> Original quotation: “prueba palpable de un proceso de lenta biografía social.”

<sup>7</sup> Original quotation: “obra de arte total.”

<sup>8</sup> Original quotation: “ciudad vibra y vale cuando vive.”



CATHEDRAL, PUEBLA. *Image: Magdalena Rojas Vences, 2017.*



SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE. *Image: Public domain.*

Piero Sanpaolesi to Carlo Ceschi, from Roberto Pane to Alfredo Barbacci and, of course, Gustavo Giovannoni, in addition to some French authors and only John Ruskin for the English-speaking world.

The reference to Italy is present in the work of both authors: in Flores Marini also with the express reference, for example, to the criterion formulated by Ambrogio Annoni (1946) of the “case by case”; in Chueca Goitia mediated through his teacher Leopoldo Torres Balbás (1888-1960) who had recognized an important reference in Gustavo Giovannoni (1873-1947), but references can also be found in his the development of his ideas, as well as in the singular appreciation expressed on how many Italian cities have been preserved compared to other European nations, including, in all evidence, Spain.

In conclusion, these are essays of extraordinary interest with high value in themselves but which also attest to a commonality of “Latin” thought and sensitivity, if I may use the term, that makes the different statements and positions mutually compatible; they are expressed in different realities, territories and even continents, but converge in a single, convinced and passionate appreciation for the past and its civil, social and memorial values. This turns the writings of the two authors into valid contributions to a more general doctrine and praxis of conservation spontaneously shared in that world and nowadays in Central-Southern Europe and also Latin America; it has oriented the thought of restoration in a “Western” way since late antiquity, starting from the 5th and 6th centuries, linking it to the physical perpetuation of “fabric,” understood as bearer and instigator of spiritual values. This, according to a “new” sensibility, is indebted to the linear and non-cyclical Judeo-Christian conception of time and memory, grafted on the philosophical and legal roots of Greco-Roman ideas. Hence the radical difference still detectable today, for example, between European and Asian sensibilities.



SANTO DOMINGO. *Image: Valerie Magar, 2022.*

From this point of view, it is immediately necessary to clear the field of the extremely reductive, not to say erroneous, idea of conservation and protection as actions motivated by “elitist” and erudite reasons, interested in the past rather than in the present or future world. On the contrary, the exact opposite is true: the conservation and restoration of cultural (and natural) heritage are for the good of our own generations and, above all, of the younger ones.

Consequently, coherently, some international documents, such as the *Declaration of Amsterdam* and the *European Charter of Architectural Heritage*, both dating back to 1975, “European Year of Architectural Heritage,” on the basis of the ascertained “insufficiency of the restoration of stones alone” (i.e., the lack of attention to the introduction of a new reason for life in the old monuments), have developed and supported the concept of “integrated conservation.” Such integration is to be understood, first of all, in an urban sense, against the artificial isolation of the heritage item from its urban, territorial and landscape context, and more generally from the historic and cultural one; secondly, it can be viewed in a functional sense as a return of the heritage item, if possible, to its original use or, alternatively, to new but “compatible” functions, consistent with the architectural nature and its own material consistency, including the state of aging and degradation. That is, as an astute “vitalization” or “cultural valorization,” not merely economic or speculative, of the asset itself, if you prefer, as “use without abuse” and, as it has been rightly said, without “consumption” of the heritage item that, by its nature, constitutes a unique and unrepeatable testimony, and therefore a “non-renewable” resource.

This is based on the just conviction that monuments and historical centers have no hope of preservation if they are not used (certainly with caution and respect, but still used) and do not, therefore, enjoy the minimal but continuous maintenance that comes from being lived in and visited. Such care works in favor of conservation more than many restoration actions.

If we consider the subject from the point of view of the history of architecture, it will be easy to note how, for example, the Pantheon of Rome has been preserved over the centuries in a much more satisfactory way than the great *Calidarium* of the Baths of Caracalla, originally solid and strong as the Pantheon; this was possible only for the fact that it was constantly attended and used, having had the fate of being transformed from the temple of all the gods to the church of all the martyrs, Santa Maria *ad Martyres*, already in late antiquity, and precisely in the year 608. But we can also remember, always in Rome, the case of Santa Sabina, a church dating back to the beginning of the 5th century that, because it has always been in use and open for worship, has preserved its intact architectural structure and even the original carved wooden door, is still in place.

Cesare Brandi, the great art historian and director of the Central Institute for Restoration in Rome for many years, rightly pointed out that the first act of restoration consists in the “recognition” of the artifact as a “work of art” or as “historic testimony”; today we would call it “cultural heritage.” A circumstance that distinguishes it from all the things that surround us and that imposes, consequently, particular attention: those, for example, that differentiate a true act of restoration from one of recovery or building renovation, a seriously conservative act from one of hasty and utilitarian modernization (or worse, in the case of the façades of an old house, of “refreshing” with new and garish colors). At the same time, this recognition has expanded from the precious object, such as the cameo or the gem, to works of pictorial and sculptural art, then to architecture and beyond, to the urban and natural landscape.

This recognition is not an elitist or erudite act either. It is, on the contrary, the guarantee of the preservation of a memory that is not only individual but collective, of identity; this in the awareness that the future is built on the past and its legacy, not on emptiness and

amnesia, which is notoriously a pathological phenomenon, both in the medical and cultural fields. Restoration and protection concern all the testimonies of the past, without differences between those of literary culture, such as an ancient codex, and those of "material culture," such as the simple but skillful preparation of plaster or a stone wall face. On the contrary, it is to the latter definable as expressions of the so-called subordinate classes, those who worked not with the instrument of writing, in Latin or even in vernacular languages, but with their intelligent manual skills, that we owe the definition of the landscape, agricultural and urban of many nations, not only in Europe.

The risk, typical of the past decades, of the ruin of ancient cities due to absolute urban disorder, brutal speculation, overloading of improper functions and active ignorance has perhaps diminished; today, the situation certainly presents itself differently, but not without dangers of another nature. In fact, a more insidious and latent process of alteration of the historical centers can be noticed, sustained by an uncontrolled and dense series of architectural modifications (typological, of surfaces, volumetric, accomplices also of the increased necessities of installations and technology, of security, of hygiene, of accessibility); by the absence of strong urban planning choices, such as the dislocation of incompatible activities, especially public ones; by a substantial social disavowal of the values of the ancient center (identified by mass culture not in the urban fabric but only in the symbolic monuments) which is followed by its slow deconstruction, with loss or distortion of its meanings.

The visible effects of these phenomena are visual confusion in the historical centers (from the advertising posters to the store windows and signs, from the networks of lighting, television, security, telephone, gas to the urban furniture, which is often untidy or pretentious); the disorder of the circulation, even in many protected areas (which makes it almost impossible to perceive the specific quality of the centers themselves); the proliferation of disqualified stores even in the most valuable areas; the constant air, noise and light pollution.

Of course, not all the ancient centers of Italy or, even more so, of Europe are in these conditions: Ferrara, Padua, or Vicenza do not have the problems of Rome, Naples or Palermo; Lucca, Cortona, Urbino, Ascoli Piceno, maintain balance and dignity, together with a reasonable vitality, as do Chantilly, in France, or Maastricht itself or many small towns in Germany or Great Britain, also mentioned by Chueca Goitia. And yet most of the historical centers show serious problems that cannot be easily solved.

Let's look at the past, going back to the 17th and 18th centuries. We can see that the most robust and most decisive push for the preservation of one's own "memories" (among which, today, we must consider, first and foremost, the historical centers) comes from the "base," that is, from the local populations (often led by exponents of the bourgeois culture of the time, prevalently literary: lower clergy, teachers, notaries, etcetera.), not by technicians (much less by architects) nor by the holders of political-administrative or religious power. Today the situation has not substantially changed, as far as the latter is concerned. At the same time, the voice of the base is represented by voluntary associations that generally express the true and most vigilant conscience of conservation.

Looking deeper, the first social cause of risk for the architectural and landscape heritage is the subordinate condition of culture and its reasons, subjected to political, technical and bureaucratic professionalism, when not to the deterrent business. Hence the slow erosion of social, material, figurative, and sense of the historic centers mentioned earlier, a crisis situation no longer as evident and violent as in past decades but equally alarming.

If this is the Italian panorama, central and northern Europe, due to their greater administrative capacity and perhaps to their probity, could be a valid model, but, in this regard, it shows serious cultural deficiencies: economic and financial criteria prevail over all; the need for protection is not felt as a prevailing value, not to say absolute, and its very contents reflect uncertainties of a theoretical and conceptual nature. The rate of deterioration of the ancient centers is equally high, even if provided with all the appearances of legality, because of more tolerant legislation and, above all, more attentive to the immediate economic needs of individuals: hence maintenance operations undertaken only on façades, the integral renewal of the architectural structures, of the isolation or total demolition (often followed by the equal and opposite action of the remaking *à l'identique* when, after some time, one realizes the damage done), and finally of distortion of the paths and ancient alignments.

Italy poses quite different questions, and the situation seems, in some respects, less dramatic: its problems are linked to the inability to live in a state of good ordinary administration, even of the most precious heritage.

In conclusion, is the care of historical centers a matter of urban planning or restoration? It is both: in a certain sense, the strategic and “immaterial” aspects are urban planning, while the tactical and “material” ones (or, better, the direct intervention on the material of the ancient buildings of which the historical centers are composed) are restoration. Urban planning establishes the rules of the game (territorial planning; the role of the historic center in relation to the entire city; compartments, minimum units of intervention; incentives to build and conserve; definition of compatible or not compatible functions; control of the overall urban image and its skyline; influence, albeit indirect, on the mechanisms of the real estate market, etcetera.) and makes use of “technical” moments alternating with “political” and “managerial” choices. Restoration constitutes the operational moment, scientifically based, on the single artifact or complex of artifacts, always keeping in mind the extension of the concept of cultural heritage from the single object to the landscape.

In this perspective, the ancient center deserves to be considered as a historical and artistic cultural “asset” unit; not necessarily as a total work of art in itself but, paraphrasing the well-known concept coined by philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866-1952), as “architectural literature,” expression of choral and widespread beauty. The unity of the historical center is similar to that of the mosaic, a unitary figure composed of several parts. Even a simple mosaic tessera, in our case a single house, can influence the whole for better or for worse. Hence the need for total commitment to tight control and constant attention to all scales of intervention, from the smallest elements to the territory as a whole, from the protection of the ancient to the pursuit of quality of new constructions.

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